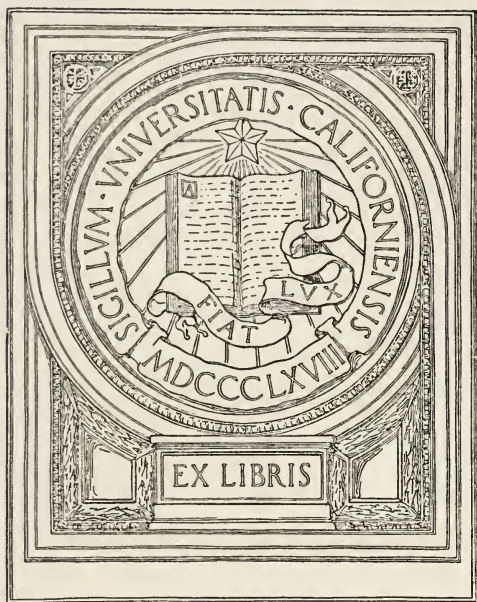


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GALLIO

ST. JOHN LUCAS



GALLIO

THE PRIZE POEM ON A SACRED SUBJECT

1908

BY
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“*Non civium ardor prava iubentium . . .
Mente quatit solida.*”

Hor. Carm. iii., 3.

GALLIO.

To Lucius Annæus Seneca in Rome
Gallio his brother,—Cæsar's pro-consul
Where o'er the twain and hardly-sundered seas,
Ionian and Ægean, Acrocorinth
Stands sentinel,—gives greeting, and such news
As exiled life may offer, and good thanks
For memories that shine like motes of gold
In the slow-falling sand of empty days.

Thou knowest, brother,—who so well as thou,
Co-heir with me to learning?—how my soul
Burned, as a caged bird maddens for the woods
In April, to behold this land, this heaven
Unfolded golden in our boyish dreams,—
This Greece, the champion of the light divine
Against barbarian dimness that recoiled
As dark-plumed night sweeps smokewise from the sun ;
This antique seat of Freedom and the Gods,

Whose forests yielded Argo, and whose mines
 Gave the bronze beaks that tore the Persian's heart,
 Swooping like greedy hawks, at Salamis;
 This shrine, this nurse of heroes, whose least name
 Haunted me like a passion,—not me alone;
 But thou, my brother, whose yet youthful front
 Glowed pale with Stoic brooding, and whose lips
 Seemed carved austere in marble,—thou hast shared
 This ecstasy. Dost thou remember yet
 That breathless night upon the Palatine
 In Cæsar's garden, where the jasmine gleamed
 Faint in the dusk, and white moths drifted slow,
 When we twain and the young Domitius
 (Whom the Gods guard to prosper Rome and thee!)
 Lay 'neath a moon whose tawny disk foretold
 Vintage, and harvest-home; and o'er the hills
 The dog-star burned like a revengeful eye?

How the whole scene comes back! I see the lad
 His bright hair crowned with roses, lying prone,
 Plucking with wilful fingers at the grass,
 Turning anon to watch thy face; and thou,
 Thy worn cheek resting on a hand too thin,
 Bent o'er the scroll upon thy knees, that came
 From Cæsar's house, the yellow vellum edged
 With thick sea-purple. Not the lips of him

Who wrought and sang that deathless argument
 Dwelt with more passion on their theme than thine ;
 O'er Hector dying and Patroclus cold,
 And Priam, not more thick with tears his eyes
 Whose name resounds like thunder of high floods ;
 Whose speech is like a vision of the sea.

But when thy voice failed, and the perfumed lamp
 Died, and the moon waxed argent, and a breeze
 Came softly, like the little timid ghost
 Of some dead child, and stirred the cypresses ;
 The boy sprang suddenly from earth, and stood
 Towering, like a beautiful young god,
 And gazed on Rome, and shook his hair, and cried :
 " O night and austere stars, and vagrant moon
 Lured Latmos-ward, be witness of this vow :
 Greece shall be free when I am Emperor ! "
 And thou, with dreamy eyes that looked to where
 The Forum and its gleaming colonnades
 Parodied Athens, raisedst thine arms to Heaven,
 And spakest with sharp yearning in thy voice,
 Homesick for lands unknown :—" To leave the glare
 And clamorous magnificence of Rome !
 The teeming games where virgins stare at blood,
 The parasite, the patron, the dull crowd ;
 The spies that dog our path, suborned of him

Who grudges us our office ; the formal life
 Of courtiers ; the recurrent spectacle
 Of our triumphant consuls, haling home
 Their load of skin-clad Dacians in chains,—
 Untamed by wounds and hunger, yet aghast
 At our hyæna-throng ;—to leave it all,
 And live a shepherd on the floral hills
 Of Thessaly and brown Ætolia,
 Or as the humblest pupil of the Porch,
 Carry the Master's books ; content to hear
 Some fragment of his lore, content to see,
 When the dawn swoops across Eubœa's heel,
 The pale Pentelican quarries flash to gold ! ”
 These were thy words. I held my peace and sighed.

And now thou tarriest yet in Rome, the friend
 Of Cæsar, loved of all men, and that dream
 Is yet untarnished ; wherefore praise the gods.
 But I, I praise them not for this desire
 Fulfilled, who came to Greece a moon ago,
 Faring from Ostia with Vulturian wind
 Past the swart brood of Liparean isles
 And fell Charybdis, and the lovely heir
 Of Grecian flowers and songs forgot in Greece,—
 Thyme-scented Sicily ;—thence o'er the dark
 Wide-heaving bosom of a dreamy sea

Sped by propitious gales, till I beheld,
 Black and sharp-edged against the dawn, like giants
 Who guard infernal flame, rugged and vast,
 Leucadia, Zacynthos, Ithaca,
 And pale beyond them in a morning mist,
 Hellas. No Fate can rob me of that hour.
 O violet hills and sea, and deathless names
 Of cities, and dim haunts of sylvan gods !
 But for this Corinth, brother, 'tis a place
 That the sun laughs to see, a gaudy tomb
 Haunted by peevish ghosts, a wilderness
 Of formal streets and tenements, once held
 By veterans of the divine Julius,
 And now by their base offspring ; with a herd
 Of men called Greeks, vain, unstable like sand,—
 A mongrel throng from Macedon and Thrace,—
 A barking rabble of Jews ; my subjects these !
 Poor heritors of the great-thewed clan that launched
 The earliest trireme on a startled wave,
 Those keen Corinthian sea-hawks who enserfed
 Corcyra, famed in rowers, and shook the pride
 Of Athens and her admirals ! All the day
 I sit in audience, striving to adjust
 The balance of their lightness, listening
 To the same dull reiterated tale :
 How Greek robbed Roman, Roman battered Greek,

And Jew pounced on the booty whilst they fought.
 Only at eve, when from inferior slopes
 Acrocorinthian, gazing north, I see
 Helicon, and the rich Crisæan plain,
 My soul revives; the soul of Greece respires
 In the dead lovely body of this land;
 I dream old pageants and am comforted;
 Yet briefly, since returning I behold
 Some hollow lonely temple all deflowered
 By brutal Mummius and his legionaries;
 A shrine where gleams amid luxuriant briars
 The perfect arm of some dishonoured god,
 Or, built into a wall, the rain-worn brow
 Of Aphrodite. Like a yellow beast
 The city crouches in the sunset glow,
 Naked and haggard. Ah! not in such haunts
 She lingers, Love's bright queen!

.

I had ended here
 My tale of disillusion, and filled the page
 With idle speech of books; but that one word
 Recalls not thee alone and thy grave brow,
 Brother and firmest friend! An alien face,
 Vivid as thine, less wan with knowledge, gleams
 Pale in the growing amethyst of dusk,—



His face that, eager as thin altar-flame
Fed with crushed gums and powdered Orient herbs,
Flared when his stammering speech waxed plain with
love ;

His face, his face, beneath whose light my soul
Saw herself judged, her philosophic robe
Shrivelled ; her dismal weed of self-esteem
Burnt in the steady flame of those great eyes.
The man was fire, all fire !

Let me describe

The event,—a nothing,—since I fail to draw
The figure of its master ; 'twas a farce,
Type of the petty feuds that make accursed
This paradise of wranglers. Thou must know
That ere the acclamation died which hailed
Cæsar's proconsul, I was straitly warned
Of certain dues expected by the mob
From the new deputy ; my forerunners
Had been most wise in this ; briefly, 'twas hoped
I should play pandar to the law, and lean
A partial finger on its rising scale.
The test came ere three suns were dim. The Jews,
Confident in their influence and my fear,
Beset the seat of judgment, as a swarm
Of thirsty wasps a fruit, and in their midst
One man, their prisoner, staunch as a rock

In some discordant sea ; his lion's head
 Thrown backward, and in his unshifting eyes
 Nor hate nor fear, only a royal calm.
 But once he glanced at me, when, having stilled
 Some portion of the tumult, I required
 His name, and answered : " Paul, the least of those
 Who preach Christ crucified." Then all the Jews
 Cried at him with fierce mouths, and Sosthenes
 Their priest, that dark fanatic : " He hath bewitched
 Crispus the ruler of our synagogue,
 Deserter to this Christ, and would destroy
 Our ancient worship, leading men to God
 By strange unlawful paths." At once the throng,
 Snarling like famished wolves, flashed up to me
 A glare of tawny faces, and I read
 Plain in their eyes the insult of their hope.
 Then, for my blood was warm with this affront
 To Roman honour, I said : " So vague a charge
 Concerns me not ; speak, hath the man done aught
 Subtly against his neighbour or the State ?
 Hath he stolen or used violence ? " They answered :
 " Nay, but he worships falsely." And the throng
 Was silent, and this Paul stood, passing calm,
 Waiting my leave to plead. But I, enraged
 Less by their insolence than sick at heart
 To see a good man so beset by fools,

Cried: "Think you god-like Cæsar sent me hither
 As fountain of your law, to hold debate
 Of washing pots, of clean and unclean meats,
 To back your private quarrels, to unleash
 The hydra of your custom at the throat
 Of him who grieves you? By my staff, not thus!
 If this man have indeed blasphemed your god,
 Look ye to it, and seek not aid from Rome.
 Dogs, do ye dare to whimper? Ho, my guards,
 Whip me this rabble from the judgment seat!"

The most part went in fear, but Sosthenes,
 Agrin with rage, shook fists at me, and cried
 Strange curses; then the idle throng of Greeks,
 No lovers of this sect, and swift to take
 The popular wind, laid angry hands on him.
 I let them brawl.

So vile a comedy,
 Thou sayest, deserves oblivion; and indeed
 I had forgotten all the paltry scene
 But for that face. Is it not strange, O brother,
 That in this feverish moment men call life,
 This narrow ray betwixt the dark and dark,
 A thousand features that we love or loathe
 Shine, pass, and are forgotten, or remain
 Blurred in the soul's false mirror, till there comes,

Terrible, without warning, like a fierce
 Amazing star that changes night to noon,
 The Master-face! This Paul the Christian,
 This sword-blade man worn lean and dark with strife,
 This dreamer and mad poet, frenzy led
 Across the grim sea of a world's contempt
 Full-sailed to the sharp reefs of shameful death,—
 He was my star! 'Twas he for whom my soul
 Had waited long in loneliness; his brow
 Was smooth with some strange peace that I had sought,
 Blindfold, since birth; all other men were ghosts;
 He, he alone was vital! Thou and I,
 Yea, all who yearn for truth beneath the sun,
 Dig in the painful sand, perchance to find
 Some tiny runnel from her central fount,
 But he hath found the source! Her's is the road
 That strikes straight up to heavenly perfectness,
 But we have sown it with a thousand briars
 And gaudy growths of falsehood, and are lost;
 He is not lost, in whose triumphant eyes
 Burns calm the perfect knowledge, the great hope,
 The love that heals the red wounds of the world!

He hath departed hence to Syria.
 I had no speech with him; I have no hope
 To see him any more; death follows him

Like his own shadow, and as little marked.
 But ere he went, I found the means to hear
 His voice, and, muffled, mid a humble throng
 Of slaves and rustic hinds, to look farewell
 On that great brow. The scanty ritual o'er,
 Most quietly he spake, as doth a father
 To his assembled sons; and while the words
 Came halting from his lips, he smiled, like one
 Who sees a steady vision that proclaims
 Health for an old, mad earth, and knows all else
 Dross, save that health. "For though I speak," he said,
 "With tongues of men and angels, lacking Love
 My voice is tuneless brass and jangled bells;
 And though I prophesy, and comprehend
 All mysteries and all knowledge, and possess
 Faith that uproots the mountains, without Love
 I am as nought; and though my hands bestow
 All treasure on the poor; yea, though I give
 This body to the fire, yet without Love
 It profiteth me nothing." Then he told
 How Love was kind, long-suffering, no envier,
 Not boastful, not self-seeking; calm and wise,
 Rejoicing in the truth; and last he spake
 Of some great vision of the truth through Love,
 When we, who see as in a darkened glass
 Her shadow, shall behold her face to face . . .

I heard no more. The Greek boy plucked my cloak;
 'Twas thought the Jews had seen me enter there.
 Life and its cares returned; I stole away
 For ever from that presence.

He is gone

Almost unheard, yet wherefore should I grieve
 Who learnt his secret ere his lips had moved?
 This Love, become a fire to burn up lies,
 A sword against the cruel, a swift shaft
 To pierce the flank of evil; Love, the germ
 Of the huge tree whose limitless boughs shall breathe
 Peace to the aching heart of all the earth.
 O thou, most dear of men that live, my brother!
 Thou knowest the strange heralds chosen of Truth;
 What if this were the long-sought remedy
 For all the blind confusion of our days,
 Our wretched strifes, our grey and hopeless deaths!
 What if the dawn at last devour the dark!

.

Night falls like rain athwart the smoke-hued sea,
 The fisher's tiny lamp shines out. Alas,
 Had those wise Greeks not missed the light, but seen
 Even as this poor man, with such clear eyes,

That gleam of hope across their desperate joy !
Had Rome, our murderous daughter of the Wolf,
Whose feet are thick with blood, been heir to this !
Thou deemest me bewitched ? Nay, hadst thou known
The magic of the man ;

I prithee send
News of our young Domitius, whom I greet.

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